

**Political Mobilization in Neighborhood Assemblies:
The Cases of Villa Crespo and Palermo¹**

Maristella Svampa and Damian Corral¹

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The year 2002 was by any reckoning extraordinary in the broadest sense of the word, as Argentina slipped into the gravest political, economic, and social crisis in its entire history. It was a time when the country surprisingly discovered itself to be a deeply mobilized society increasingly divided between those with excessive wealth and those suffering economic desperation, a society fighting to recover its capacity for action through the reconstitution of ties of cooperation and solidarity that had been strongly undermined during the lengthy decade of neoliberalism.

The events of December 2001 opened a new space for the reappearance of activist politics with the involvement of multiple social groups. The slogan, "Get rid of them all, so that not one is left!" ("*iQue se vayan todos y que no quede ni uno solo!*" in Spanish) that the crowds repeated amid the noise of the pots being banged in the streets revealed the extent of the collapse of support for conventional political representation, as well as its displacement towards new forms of political action. In particular, this seemed a rupture with the limited world of formalistic, self-centered institutional politics subordinated to the established economic and financial interests that so typified the 1990s. In this sense, neighborhood assemblies were the legitimate replacement for this rejected model, expressing a shift towards a politics arising more from within Argentine society itself.

This new scenario gave greater visibility to existing social movements, above all to the *piquetero* groups of the unemployed poor, some of which began to develop a linkage to other social sectors, especially with the more activist parts of the middle class. At the same time, this opening made possible and promoted the emergence

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of other self-organized parts of society: neighborhood assemblies, barter clubs, groups of saving-account holders whose money was frozen in the banks, worker self-managed factories, and counter-cultural collectives.

In the present chapter, we propose to analyze some of the political dimensions of the mobilizations that had their origin during the days of December 19 and 20, 2001, and that had their epicenter in the city of Buenos Aires. In this regard, we first will provide an account of the general phenomenon of neighborhood assemblies, so as to later concentrate on the specific cases of two in the Argentine Capital--those of the Villa Crespo and the Palermo districts--that we studied in 2002. At the end, we will provide a series of overall conclusions concerning the difficulties as well as the legacy of this social movement.

The Assemblies as a Multi-Dimensional Space.

"We are in the assembly because we need to find a new form of social organization. If we suggest unified action, the question is whether those who take a more party-oriented approach to politics can function there. We are neither proposing that nor one of opposition [to the parties]. First we have to discuss what we want and how. [We need to discover] what are the things that divide us and those that unite us so as to be able to march together."

(Member of Palermo Assembly)

No one can deny that the neighborhood assemblies have constituted one of the most novel expressions of the social mobilizations that developed from December 19 and 20, 2001. Despite its heterogeneity, we believe that the assembly process took form in an environment where specific socio-political dimensions were intermixed.

First, the neighborhood assemblies constituted a space for organization and deliberation, itself conceived as breaking with traditional forms of political representation while favoring forms of self-organization linked more closely to society, those aspiring to more equal relations and tending toward the exercise of direct action.

Second, they expressed the emergence of a new form of action fundamentally challenging the status quo. This was action that broke with the fatalistic discourse and ideology of the 1990s that there could be no alternative to what was happening, thereby returning to individuals their capacity to become genuine actors in public life; certainly, many people became masters of their own destiny both individually and collectively. In the same way, the assemblies brought with them the promise of creating places for solidarity and trust through which social ties, badly undermined after a decade of neo-liberal commercialization, could now be reconstructed.

Third, and amplifying the former point, these new experiences provided a sector of the middle class, especially those from the city of Buenos Aires, with an important place in the political scene. In effect, the neighborhood assemblies arose as a space for the reconstitution of the political identity of the middle class, a move that took as its starting point its present fragmentation and heterogeneity, in contrast with the relative cultural uniformity and greater prospect for social integration that it once had in the past.

In this sense, one should recognize that the neighborhood assemblies provided important spaces for intermixing, encounters, and discussion for different social sectors that had lacked any previous connections. This experience was doubly so, both within as well as outside one's own movement. From the point of view of social composition, an important amalgam of the middle class came together, including merchants, employees, and professionals from both public and private sectors, themselves linked to administrative, educational, and health care jobs. But many of those present were now impoverished, and some had a record of high job instability. Also included were unemployed people from different backgrounds, as well as young people of quite radical views. Many of these participants had their first political experience here.

Neighborhood differences were very important since in some places there was a strong presence of the professional middle class whose role seems closely associated with the affluent, cosmopolitan nature of the City of Buenos Aires.

Finally, as a major corollary, the assemblies emerged as a space for meeting social actors with different economic horizons and life opportunities, showing degrees of social complexity that varied with the neighborhood.

In sum, the assemblies were a complex public space in which these particular aspects were intermingled to varying degree. Nevertheless, this multidimensional space was from the beginning permeated by different tensions and policy ambivalence whose persistence put at risk their initial dynamics. Today, many people ask about the reasons for the crisis and fragmentation of the assembly movement, as well as about the meaning and direction that a body of such differing elements eventually assumed.

To provide the phenomenon here under analysis with some historical perspective, we provide a schematic chronology presenting many of the most important moments or milestones that characterized the assembly movement when it was at its most active in 2002.

1. January-February: The stage for the creation of the neighborhood assemblies and of the Centenary Park City-Wide Assembly (the so-called "Interbarrial"). At this moment, the use of "*cacerolazo*" protests banging on pots and pans appeared as the identifying key to the new movement. This was the period of greatest enthusiasm. Plenary sessions enjoyed the participation of 100-150 persons per assembly.

2. From February or March, different commissions (including ones on health, politics, the press, the unemployed, etc.) began to fully function, something that would favor the discussion process and the recovery of a capacity for taking collective action.

3. On March 24, the different neighborhood assemblies of the capital and of the metropolitan region made their first appearance at a political event, that repudiating the 1976 military coup, with long columns of "neighbors," where their presence strongly contrasted with the absence of the traditional political parties.

4. Competition for the leadership of the assembly movement by the different parties of the traditional left including the Workers Party (or Partido Obrero/PO), the Socialist Workers Movement (or Movimiento Socialista de los Trabajadores/MST), and the Communist Party (or Partido Comunista/PC) strengthened the tendency towards fragmentation that the movement exhibited from its beginning, a situation that led to the departure of many "independent," [non-party] members. The celebration of May Day that year constituted a moment for a change of direction due to the strong pressures created

by the left-wing political parties on the local assemblies as well as at the Centenary Park City-Wide one, to guarantee turnout at their own party events.

5. During May, pressure from "independent" members of the different assemblies produced a major change in the character of the Centenary Park City-Wide Assembly. The slogan shifted from "one person, one vote" to "one assembly, one vote." In short, the City-Wide now became an institution representative of the neighborhood groups.

6. Also in May a further coordinating body was created at a level above the City-Wide Assembly, commonly referred to as the Colombres group (after the name of the street where it habitually met). This new space for the expression of views was openly partisan, in contrast with the City-Wide Assembly that could not be, at least not explicitly so. Colombres arose as a result of pressure from the left-wing parties (principally the MST and the PO) to create a supreme decision-making body for the entire assembly movement, despite the complaint of other groups and of "independents".

7. In June, a grave act of police repression occurred at the Pueyrredón Bridge in nearby Avellaneda, culminating in the murder of two piquetero protesters, Darío Santillán and Maximiliano Kosteky, both activists in the Unemployed Workers Movement of the Aníbal Verón Coordinating Group. This criminal act was seen as part of a political effort to delegitimize the piquetero movement (that was itself initially blamed for the deaths) and to create the possibility of establishing an openly repressive State. However, the publication of photos showing how the murders occurred ruined that plan, forcing a shift in government policy. Now President Duhalde saw himself obliged to call early general elections, while having to adopt a more legalistic line in handling the "piquetero question." On the other hand, the murders shook Argentine society, and generated massive marches repudiating such violence. Finally, the change of scene brought with it greater visibility for the separate sectors of the piquetero movement, deepening the elective affinity that now was developing between them and parts of the mobilized middle class.

8. During the month of July, various assemblies occupied different unused buildings that mostly belonged either to the Banco de la Provincia de Buenos Aires or to the Banco de Mayo. These occupations lasting some two weeks did not produce any response from the mass media. Nevertheless, the courts initiated legal writs for evicting

those involved with surprising speed, and gained forced entrance to some of the occupied buildings.

9. From the months of September and October, the neighborhood assemblies developed links with "*cartoneros*" [desperately poor people nightly collecting discarded cardboard boxes and newspaper from garbage piled at street curbs throughout the city]. These inter-class relations varied from simply providing aid and cooperation (e.g., vaccination of *cartoneros*, food prepared in the street in so-called community kitchens (the "*ollas populares*") to, in some cases, acts challenging the authorities like what took place in the buildings first occupied by assembly activists, but later kept going by *cartoneros* themselves actually living on the site.

10. In respect to joint action, by November, the Centenary Park Inter-City decayed both in terms of the number of participating assemblies and in regard to the topics under discussion. The Colombares group was experiencing the same fate by then, given that many individual assembly members from the beginning did not feel represented there. Playing an important role in this situation was the only slight connection between the formal mandates of the neighborhood assembly delegates and the decisions that were made at Colombares. In the context of a crisis of institutions for coordinating joint action, groups began to support the idea of their own autonomous action. Thus some of the most highly mobilized groups like the Cid Campeador Assembly continued meeting to think about the character and matters to be included in their own assembly space.

11. On the first anniversary of December 19-20, there was no single joint act, but rather two, each differing in kind and size. On the morning of the 19th, one sector of the assemblies (that most willing to act on its own) carried out "urban picketing" that consisted in the blockage of streets in downtown Buenos Aires near the Stock Exchange and the Central Bank, with the goal of interrupting financial activity. These actions, accompanied by rich and colorful staging and artistic performances, were coordinated by different assemblies, counter-cultural collectives, and student groups. In this case, there would be no speeches, but only a series of direct acts against the political class and the symbols of capitalist power like finance capital. In contrast, a day later on December 20 there was a large mobilization that would finish up in the Plaza de Mayo, the site of the national government. Flags and handkerchiefs mostly belonging to different *piquetero* groups provided color for the demonstration. Characteristically, the assemblies that

turned out here did not try to occupy the historic plaza, but remained on side streets from where they followed the well-attended event. A brief communiqué read by two assembly members was inserted among some twenty piquetero speeches.

The Assemblies of Villa Crespo and Palermo:

Their Origin, Organizational Evolution, and Type of Participant.

The "Gustavo Benedetto"² Assembly of Villa Crespo (a traditional middle class neighborhood) was formed after the events that occurred on December 19 and 20 that ended the presidency of Fernando De la Rúa. On those two days, some five thousand people gathered together at the intersection of Scalabrini Ortiz and Corrientes—streets in the heart of the Villa Crespo neighborhood—with some three hundred of them continuing to meet over the next several days. After a short time, the assembly divided into three separate groups, each named after a separate street corner in the Villa Crespo neighborhood: the Corrientes and Juan B. Justo Assembly, the Angel Gallardo and Corrientes Assembly, and the Scalabrini Ortiz and Corrientes Assembly. As the largest of the three assemblies with some one hundred and fifty members, this last retained the name of the original group. It was controlled by the left-wing parties.

After the split, this "Gustavo Benedetto" Assembly began to function through different commissions: labor, the press, culture, services, political action, health, and community purchases. Meetings were set for once a week, on Wednesdays at 8 p.m. in the Pugliese Plazoleta located at the corner of Scalabrini Ortiz and Corrientes. At its beginning, the assembly counted in its ranks on ample participation by independent residents, themselves varied in their socioeconomic make-up but with greater presence of people from the lower middle class. As the months went on, there was a strong loss of members so that participation became limited to the most combative members of the middle class who assumed a broad political commitment that went beyond the defense of their own personal economic interests.

After a number of assemblies, discussion of the identity and ideological orientation of the group became more important, touching on the type of political action needed to have an impact on the neighborhood and for ties to other nearby assemblies

and organizations. This shift to such local matters was represented both as a tactic for group preservation as well as something needed to satisfy the wishes of members from the neighborhood. The proposal for local self-control proposed by some residents contrasted with the form of struggle, confrontation, and ideological perspective that young militants from the Communist Party and MST wanted to force on the assembly. The latter were people who found a fertile field there for action, supported as they were by some of the original adult members who were themselves more oriented toward political reflection and deliberation.³

With the group's seizure of a building, its activities grew in number:⁴ members organized a discussion program on films, a workshop on helping in the schools, a talk by leftist economists, recitals, celebrations for Children's Day, and other cultural activities. In this way, activities of local self-management that had been set aside until then because of the greater importance of the more immediate needs of the movement now became invigorated. The availability of their own site brought in new members and attracted old neighbors and militants who had left the assembly, gradually closing the gap between residents and assembly political activists that had acted as a restraint on group action.

The assembly found in Palermo (a comfortable middle class neighborhood) contrasts with that of Villa Crespo, both in how it was set up and in its organizational capacity. Like Villa Crespo, Palermo began functioning in the first half of January, usually attracting somewhat less than one hundred people. Some of the early topics for discussion among the members included a diagnosis of the current political situation and what should be done, the question of elections, the economy, and the foreign debt. A majority of the members were "independents" with little direct political party connection, but with some notable presence of young people from the university or political parties. Those participating in the assembly averaged close to fifty years of age, with many of them being professionals. A short time later, they began to get together once a week in a neighborhood bar where they met until the local *Centro de Gestión y Participación* or CGP (Center for Management and Participation), an agency of the Buenos Aires municipal government, gave them a place. By then, the assembly was attracting some fifty people each month but where participation eventually fell to half that by the final month.

At its beginning, the Palermo Assembly showed signs of suffering from organizational weakness in terms of how it ran its commissions. One noted for its activism in the first months was the Health Commission, although it later virtually disintegrated. Neither the Management Control Commission that at first was concerned with the analysis of the law on local communities and the idea of a budget created by direct citizen participation (the "participatory budget") nor the Commission for Community Purchases with an image of concern for charity carried much weight in the full assembly. Dominated by strong personalities, the Commissions for Culture, Politics and Economics, and that of Organization and Security all found it impossible to assume a pattern of active decision-making during their duration. For its part, the Press Commission was among other things responsible for the production of the assembly's own radio program broadcast weekly on FM Palermo, something that guaranteed it an interesting means to spread news of its activities throughout the neighborhood and the surrounding area.

We want to emphasize that the Villa Crespo Assembly maintained stable ties with the Inter-Assembly Health Commission, possessed channels for easy dialogue with other assemblies in the area, and took an active participation on the Inter-Assembly Commissions for Public Services, the Inter-City Assembly, and in Food Forums. Contacts were gradually established with the activist National Piquetero Bloc to the point where a small group of assembly militants became members of one of the autonomous neighborhood piquetero groups still existing there today. But contacts further from the neighborhood were much weaker. Encouraged by some party activists, there was strong distrust toward the social organizations, cooperatives, or NGOs that approached the assembly from the outside, with members suspecting that such groups merely wanted to use such a linkage to their own advantage. There would, for example, be no lasting ties to groups like the saving account holders.

The Palermo Assembly, on the other hand, was more open to external groups. It established contacts at the local CGP with leaders of the well known NGO, Citizen Power (or Poder Ciudadano) who attended the weekly meetings of the assembly's Management Control Commission and offered a workshop on participatory budgeting in which the members of the commission participated. Similarly, the assembly participated in the Palermo area inter-zonal meetings. On different occasions, some assembly activists took part in marches of the Argentine Savers Movement. Individuals also made contact

with the Alejandro Olmos Movement involved with the issue of the illegitimacy of the Argentine foreign debt and with noted constitutional specialists who spoke on the problem of elections.

Problematic Aspects in the Evolution of the Assemblies.

In the heat of debate over various months, the two assemblies under discussion in general demonstrated different views on external political contacts. Referring to this matter, we want to utilize the contrasting images of "bridge" and "door" suggested by Georg Simmel (1986), the thinker par excellence of "social disintegration." Stated briefly, while the notion of "bridge" contains the idea of connection and linkage, that of "door" through its recognition of separation as an initial condition, implies an affirmation of division, bringing with it the idea of withdrawal, of closure even if from what was an original opening. Amid general social disenchantment, the metaphor of a bridge suggests alternatives emphasizing the need to reconstruct the political system as a more participatory democracy with the recovery of space for this within the state. In contrast, the use of the metaphor of a door suggests a more radical critique of the political system of representation and the need to create new forms of sociability, social networks, and organizations of solidarity outside of and distant from established institutional structures. Associated with the latter view, one also finds positions calling for the complete replacement of the present order, something that might be possible with the emergence of a truly revolutionary situation in the diagnosis of certain leftist political parties.⁶ This last radical perspective is illustrated by some of the leaders and militants of the parties that in ideological and practical terms have asserted certain fundamental postulates of a highly dogmatic marxism, especially as to three basic points: the nature of the historical moment, the role of organization, and the concept of power. They here exhibited great blindness and an absolute lack of any self-criticism during the internal fights that broke out in passing months for the control and leadership of the different neighborhood assemblies, at the next level in the Inter-City Assembly, and at the highest level in the Colombres Assembly.

The evolution of the assemblies studied can be characterized by the difficulty in resolving differences and rival views concerning the proper direction for

political action, as well as the internal dynamic appropriate for the function of each of the assembly movement. Problem areas developed that became the center of tensions and, in the extreme, constituted insurmountable limits for even the bare maintenance of the level of participation and the social innovation so enthusiastically proclaimed at the beginning by those involved in this new form of politics.

In order to illustrate some of these difficulties, we offer a three part discussion: in the first, we develop two questions, one linked to the proper function of assemblies, and one to the changing level of assembly participation. In the second, we reflect more broadly on the tensions noticed about the identity and the political direction of the assemblies. Finally, we analyze some general aspects as well as the specifics of ties with groups outside the assembly movement.

Places and Identities:

From the Need to "Secure" an Occupied Building
to the Bother of Having a "Secure" Place.

"All of us are not interested in building anything; the place is always empty; there is never anyone. We need to recognize that this is a cycle that is over, and that the political parties are ruining the assembly. The "independents" allow us to be coopted by the political parties either due to their inexperience or due to being jerks. My concrete proposal is that the place be closed, that the cycle is over, that we cannot coexist, that we must accept defeat even if it is painful. Five of us put ourselves out, [but] no one ever comes to any activity. This space is not us. We are exhausting ourselves for something already dead."

(Independent activist from the Villa Crespo Assembly)

"This is not about the CGP (Centro de Gestión y de Participación [the municipality's Center for Management and Participation]) or not. But about having a place where we can think."

(Member of the Palermo Assembly)

The seizure by members of the Villa Crespo Assembly of the building belonging to the Banco de la Provincia meant the abandonment of the public space found in the street, their most direct contact with the external world, to withdraw to an enclosed area where people could participate. The months after the appropriation of the building were marked by discussion about how over time to best secure the place they had seized. The concern for legality and over any eventual police effort to gain entry to the site produced arduous and extended discussion over the possibility of being stuck in the courts should such an event occur. An additional matter was the more general issue of the importance of the legality or illegality of the seizure in the context of the idea of a permanent struggle against all legal or institutional aspects of political and public matters.⁷

With time and the fading of the euphoria raised by the occupation, questions emerged concerning what to do to justify their stay in the occupied building. The organization of snacks, a weekly food kitchen, social and cultural activities (like help for schools, different craft workshops, film discussions, etc.) all functioned as group activities with varying degrees of effectiveness.

The issue of staying in the building over night in the face of the likely possibility of being thrown out set off the most serious conflicts, leading to confrontations, accusations, denunciations, and even threats of expulsion. Despite the unity acclaimed as needed to secure the seizure, in terms of hard facts, only a handful of mostly young assembly members taking turns could be found to sleep there in the early days. With the arrival of cartoneros at the building and their inclusion in the snacks, their staying at night in the building served shortly afterwards as the subject for heated assembly discussions of incidents (thefts, messes left, etc.) involving them. Consequently, joint meetings were set up to consider the possibility of naming people responsible for the site and of creating rules for shared use, including prohibitions and punishments. But these measures were

rapidly discarded in the face of the sharp rejection of any imposition of order in a space deemed "egalitarian and democratic."

The delayed implementation of any systematic plan of order was similar to the disagreement over the utility of the seizure of the building and the vagueness of the political goals being pursued there. Defeatist attitudes emerged concerning the possible closure of the site given the lack of any clear, convincing political argument justifying its continuation and denunciation of the "colonization" of the building by political parties. Nevertheless, faced with the choice between continuing at the site or returning to the street, a decision was made in favor of the first option despite some weekly meetings now being held outdoors at the assembly's original venue at the corner of Scalabrini Ortiz and Corrientes.

In contrast with Villa Crespo, the Palermo Assembly was much more vacillating and self-contradictory in respect to the question of having a site of their own. The topic was discussed at various weekly meetings, with members even deciding to participate in one of the Villa Crespo assemblies so as to ask advice on how to organize a takeover. Early on, two or three people were given the task of finding an unused building in the neighborhood that could serve as a place for the assembly. But finally, in accord with the caution that characterized the behavior of that assembly, its members voted to decide to accept a place provided at the neighborhood CGP (Centro de Gestión y Participación). Despite this decision, meeting at the CGP was a never-ending topic for the assembly that frequently became the focus of debate and conflict. Thus one group of members who had participated from the beginnings of the assembly decided to walk out of the site they considered part of the government or the state; if others continued attending the assembly, they insisted on denouncing the CGP, concerned about any loss of visibility of the assembly's site, desertion of members, and the claim that the street was the natural place for the assembly as an expression of mobilization, struggle, and political action.

But for another group of members, the street/CGP antithesis raised the false argument of thinking that politics could be done only in the street, there displaying the symbols that would identify the assembly. For such members, the space provided by the CGP provided an ideal place for reflection, a place where "we can hear ourselves" and develop the deliberation necessary so as to avoid marching uncritically behind whatever banners preceded successive mobilizations. They argued emphatically that politics should

not to be thought about in terms of places but in reference to concrete actions and activities that, in turn, had to appear based on reflection.

In sum, the debate over where the weekly assembly meeting should take place was not limited to the mere question of logistics. It helped to delineate a certain political vision concerning the relation with the state, the appropriation of public space, and ways of confronting institutional power. Here the street was conceived as a place for *concrete and specifically defined activity*; it was not just an arena where conflict became visible or which served as the battle trench for struggle and mobilization, the decisive emplacement for uncompromising political struggle. One assembly member calmly stated, "the first response we have to give those who oppress us is [that they should] listen to us," synthesizing the difficulties of shifting from being interpreters of politics to becoming more politically involved.

Colombres, Full Autonomy, and the Definition of Political Goals.

"Discussing and making policy are important. The problem is when someone wants to make policy for everyone else. We all make policy when we state 'I propose,' and not 'I propose for him.' The political parties understood the assembly as an open shop window. But the assemblies have to defend and develop themselves because they are the genuine organizations that sprang from the 'argentínazo' [the events of December 19-20, 2001]. People must talk, act, and follow things up. How should we understand that they went to mess up the Centennial Park Assembly with their violence? We do not want any organization to act behind the backs of another. It is easy to develop a body in which someone proposes himself as a delegate. It is easy to control such structures, and Argentina has lived through this over the last one hundred and fifty years. We must turn things around with a new style of democracy. We should avoid proclaiming ourselves anyone's delegates."

(Member of the Villa Crespo Assembly and of the MTR)

[Movimiento Teresa Rodríguez] piquetero group)

"We said the other day that our goals needed to be clarified. To me this seems rather secondary, merely a formality, whether we have that discussion ourselves. But people run to us from everywhere in a disorderly way to impose on us where we ought to be going. We do have to debate political goals. It is difficult because we are all equal among ourselves, quite unlike the political parties. We have to have a discussion to know whom we are going to support."

(Member of Palermo Assembly)

The importance Colombres Street was acquiring as the highest venue for overall political coordination of the assembly movement accentuated the tensions among the political groups competing in the Villa Crespo Assembly (PO, MST, PC). Colombres was proclaimed by MST and, to a lesser extent, by PC activists there as a space for what they called "unity in diversity," a view opposed by the Partido Obrero, the MTR, and some independent assembly militants. Such advocates of Colombres as a space for all views proposed bringing their assembly's program there, seeking points of consensus with other assemblies to be used in defining a program for joint struggle. Those more critical of Villa Crespo's participation at Colombres complained of the absence of democratic rules there, and the creation of a place for inter-party agreement that neither respected nor represented the views of ordinary assembly members. Defining the assembly's political orientation was proposed as a priority within a notion of group autonomy and sovereignty, so as to later discuss in what manner members could participate in an egalitarian setting in such places for inter-group coordination. With the recent strong decay of the City-Wide Assembly process, people began to discuss the proposal of the Cid Campeador Assembly to create a new place for independent unrestricted coordination so as to strengthen cases of coordination in different city zones.

The political parties of the left encountered resistance in the Palermo Assembly. The limited impact of militant groups there helped make the focus on places for

coordination running from Colombres to the Palermo Inter-zonal Assembly a secondary goal seen to be of limited relevance to the members of this assembly. The likely challenge to any such plan and the certain visceral rejection from some participants of any proposal of party origin weakened the importance of any central spot for general coordination as potential channels of sociability and as enclaves for the articulation of a program or of a plan for joint action agreed to by different social groups. The same attitude of distrust and an assumption of independence continued while participating in different demonstrations or mobilizations organized by other social organizations; assembly members were indignant over being seen as a mere appendage of the political parties. On various occasions, people voiced negative evaluations of such demonstrations--"the political exploitation of the assembly"--and people insisted on "giving priority to our autonomy." Even when assembly activists belonging to other social organizations like the Argentine Workers Central pushed the importance of discussing criteria for unity with allied groups, of abandoning political "purity," and seeking to have a presence in all relevant places, most assembly members believed that political debate and reflection on group objectives and identity should prevail over the idea of favoring such proposals.

This cleavage went back to the traditional opposition of reflection to action, a view insistently rejected by certain intellectual argument voiced within the assembly. Thus the long, polemical debate over

basic structural factors like politics, economics, and ideology never produced any minimum program that, in general terms, expressed the political and ideological identity of the assembly as a social movement. The demobilizing nature of the assembly from its beginning was superimposed on all this, resulting in only a few assembly members, in some cases only in an individual capacity, participating actively in demonstrations, marches and pickets.

The Extremes of Disorder: Partisan Knowledge vs. Expert Knowledge.

"I am in pain. I go from the assembly in pain. Today I am convinced that one cannot work with the parties. I want to be civic-minded. I don't want to be a McCarthyite. Day after day I believe you can't work with the parties. . . .I believe equally that there are many valuable activists (from my view, good

people, 'compañeros'). The "independents" of course, but also many kids from parties. And I believe that that is where much damage is done. I believe that politics can work ethically. I am not going to abandon the struggle. I don't even know from where I will go on fighting, but without any doubt I will continue. I expect to see them in the street."

(Resignation letter of an independent member
of the Villa Crespo Assembly)

"All the things that are happening to us have to be seen from some initial clash, the hesitation with respect to whether the assemblies were the germ of a new idea--a new and different form of government--or if the assemblies were a place for tolerance, an experimental place. So now we must participate urgently in every possible space. This is something cultural and social. If we hurry with making commitments, it seems to me that we only want to see through the choices made who replaces that government."

(Member of Palermo Assembly)

In general terms, it is good to remember that along with the political parties of the left there were from the beginning intellectuals and professionals from the social sciences who also became fully immersed in these new experiences, seeking from their different perspectives to combine the double function of analyst and actor. Nevertheless, also from the beginning, this double enterprise encountered a major obstacle given that the assembly's basic dynamics were accompanied by a strong demand that all be treated as equals: everyone was a "neighbor" where no particular sub-identity as party activist or professional could be used to claim a special monopoly over knowledge. If such rejection appeared in the end to be radically new, it was because it applied without qualification to all types of pre-existing discourse.

The image of neighbor then became central, even if it appeared as a kind of invocation of a rather broad group that nobody was very concerned with defining. Despite this lack of specificity, this image of neighbor early on seemed highly functional in establishing limits, especially on the repeated claims for such particular identities. Later on, the recognition of the different political activists and professionals present in the neighborhood assemblies provided substance for a new term, a kind of broader identifying label represented by the image of "assembly member." Even later still, the assembly member became in one sense that militant, now defined as quite different from a mere neighbor, who sought to become involved in building new political projects through different neighborhood activities.

The transition from "neighbor" to "assembly activist" now also expressed a major turn that revealed the advance of special identities. This twist clearly carried with it a changed situation reflecting the release the sort of basic tension found in the original dynamic of the assembly movement, with the open fight that the left-wing parties initiated to dominate these new processes, as well as the less explicit and supposedly less self-interested struggle unleashed by certain unaffiliated leftist intellectuals. A competition of rival leaders was being staked out to deal with this situation, illustrated not only by the visible action of the leftist political parties, but also by the assertion of certain independent intellectuals that they had a monopoly of expert knowledge, something that was done in the name of building "new political projects." Such claims by these intellectuals seemed to happen where, as with the Palermo Assembly, the leftist political parties did not play any real role. On various occasions, plenary sessions ended by becoming lengthy harangues by professionals, amid a situation with little willingness to listen to others and a dialectic of frequent argumentative challenges. This all took place despite the wish shown by many especially younger assembly members to moderate the corrosive effect of a minimally cooperative style where sarcastic comments alternated with full professorial tone.

In sum, unlike other neighborhood assemblies that set out along the difficult path of autonomous action, the two cases studied here did not survive the impetuous attacks of the leftist political parties or the pressures of those claiming expert knowledge. The extreme fate of the assemblies of Villa Crespo and Palermo fully illustrates that kind of divisive tension reflecting the double impact of the militant practices of the traditional left affected on the one hand by its assimilation of party-based knowledge and, on the other,

by its convergence with expert or professional knowledge. In consequence, an important opportunity to give these new spaces a truly novel democratic form was being lost, given the strength of this tension reflecting the negative impact of both types of knowledge, together with traditional political practices.⁸

In more general terms, the question of the different conceptions of politics had become the center of a basic tension whose emergence and apparent negative resolution contributed to set maximum limits for the movement: all this allows us to understand—despite the reoccurring demand for equal relations, the incessant speeches, the innumerable calls for direct democracy, and finally despite the real concrete exercise of participatory democracy linked to neighborhood work and internal discussion-- why the assemblies encountered such serious difficulties in making themselves a place for building consensus. At the end, this internal tension between different concepts of politics (and the de facto affirmation of a party-based hegemony from one side and a hegemony of expert knowledge from the other) led to a major impasse, one which made obvious the difficulty the assemblies had in turning themselves into a real place for political deliberation.

We wish to emphasize not only the negative role played by political party-based knowledge of which so much has been said but also the easily observable not very happy connection between old political practices and so-called expert knowledge. If both played some part here, it is therefore worthwhile to stop to ask ourselves concerning such political practices what is the real nature of those positions considered novel in a type of politics that oscillated between what was represented by the image of the bridge and that of the door. We ought to once more clarify that in those assemblies with a strong presence of the professional middle class and where the weight of leftist political parties was not determinant, expert knowledge did not always end up in part filling the vacuum left by political-party related knowledge. Other assemblies like those found in the Collegiales and the Palermo Viejo neighborhoods that had very high percentages of professionals and ex-party activists, as well as that from Cid Campeador where young people played a fundamental role, did finally manage to consolidate themselves as autonomous entities by controlling their internal tensions.

Social Interactions and Links with Others:

The Debate Between Charity and Self-Management

“The kids came alone any time to ask for food so we provided it. This became a habit for them and we ended up offering charity not solidarity, things separated by a thing line. The cartonero is not someone who is unemployed, he is someone who has a different way of thinking because he is used to producing some earnings. He doesn't have a timetable, there is no trade union that organizes them, there are no rules.”

(Member of Villa Crespo Assembly)

“The first experience with the ‘cartoneros’ was one of mutual respect. They were docile and grateful.”

(Member of Palermo Assembly)

“The purpose and function of the soup kitchen was to rebuild the social fabric that broke down with the dictatorship.”

(Member of Palermo Assembly)

The assembly dynamic that developed exposed different competing views about political ties. These tensions and antagonisms were for some time, in effect, muted within a single broad policy axis containing the rival options of political autonomy and political subordination. It is necessary to focus on this crucial point for a moment.

Originally, the demand for autonomy expressed more than anything a general rejection of the political class and its institutional expressions. Sharing this negative view were both neighborhood “independents” who supported reform of the institutional system

(the metaphor of the bridge) and those inclined to a more radical position but not identified with any party (the metaphor of the door). Nevertheless, even seen from a defensive perspective, assembly autonomy was emerging as a strong practical organizational principle, visible in the incessant effort to restrain the attempts at hegemony fervently pressed by militants of the left-wing parties, especially the different Trotskyite splinter groups.

On the one hand, this demand for autonomy provided a structural dimension to the movement to the extent that the assemblies had to confront other dilemmas: for example, in respect to the linkages to the state and, even more so, to the existent legal order, with the occupation of abandoned buildings. On the other hand, both the grave economic situation experienced by the country as well as the movement's internal political tensions reinforced the urgent need to carry out actions of solidarity with the less well-off sectors of society. Thus, looking inward, the image of social interconnection pointed out the great heterogeneity of the middle sectors represented in the assemblies; looking outward suggests the ties developed with other socially mobilized forces including piquetero groups, workers in occupied abandoned factories (the so-called "*fábricas recuperadas*") and, especially, the cartoneros.

Put simply, "looking outward" to the full range of possible ties, on one side could be found the piqueteros, an organized social actor possessing consistency, projects, and their own ideological orientations. They were people with whom the assembly members had always maintained a rather ambivalent relation, given differences over the charity-like actions taken toward them. At the other extreme were the cartoneros who with differing amounts of organization represented an embryonic social movement before whom the middle class assembly members adopted what would appear to be a pedagogical attitude never far removed from being clearly pure charity.⁹ Finally, "looking outward," it is appropriate to point out that there were a multitude of acts of social solidarity, not only the support to the piqueteros but that provided to the workers in the occupied factories. The paradigmatic case was the Brukman factory that resisted three efforts to evict the workers during 2002. Each time, assembly activists were among the first in mobilizing to impede the ousting of the workforce from the factory. The definitive eviction took place in April 2003 several days after an episode of strong repression.

Over time, the debates of a political nature over forms of democracy were replaced by acts of solidarity. Thus one type of action producing the highest membership mobilization (but one which was nevertheless still controversial) was that linked to food aid. Some experiences relating to linkages were especially symbolic like the campaign to vaccinate cartoneros, implemented by one of the most active assemblies in the northern zone of the Capital. Soup kitchens and the provision of snacks multiplied especially after the takeover of buildings that various assemblies in the Capital organized between June and September 2002. What to do was at the center of all assembly experiences.

In the case of Villa Crespo, the inauguration of a both a snack service and a dining room attracted various cartoneros and poor neighborhood children to their site. The efforts of some militants redoubled to spread such activity throughout the neighborhood and in the schools, as well as to solicit donations of food and medicine from neighborhood merchants. But a discussion of the charity-like appearance that was coloring the snacks and the dining room rapidly spilled over to various difficulties in sustaining such activity in terms of material and human resources. The act of providing food to eat led to an effort by political party groups to forge some political consciousness toward the cartoneros. Similarly, some more independent activists proposed to require from them a commitment and a responsible attitude in respect to their participation in assembly activities and their use of the site for sleeping. The short-lived stay of some cartoneros in the building in the views of some assembly members suggested disorder, lack of respect for the other "*compañeros*," and incidents of robbery of items from the site.

The failure to integrate reflected the reciprocal instrumental relation developed by both sectors.

Seen as a failure, the experience with the cartoneros renewed the discourse in favor of the snacks as a political project aimed at connecting with the most impoverished parts of the neighborhood and to give them a model for emulation. Nevertheless, as the difficulties involved with the operation of the snacks increased, they became a factor in a furious dispute among different party groups. The object of working with the neighborhood unemployed became questioned, with some arguing that they had their own organizations and that the snacks were part of a strategy of one of the leftist parties to take over the building. This political debate that continued during several weekly

meetings was transformed into a factor of denunciations, accusations, and personal grievances in which certain social representations negatively associated with the cartoneros were found that created pressure for the ending of the snacks.

In its turn, the Palermo Assembly found the organization of a weekly food kitchen a bonding activity where some neighborhood residents who had left the assembly plus new people began to participate, producing of its effects on an enlarged neighborhood membership. The food kitchen continued until the end of 2002 in one of the plazas in the neighborhood and attracted a group of cartoneros who frequented the zone. Despite some reticence, the majority of assembly members agreed on the need for this activity as an effort for greater impact in the neighborhood and for a link to other social sectors.

The propensity for developing charitable activity was a warning about the assembly's concerns. However the traditional skepticism and defensiveness toward developments was silenced by the expectation and enthusiasm created when the food kitchen went into effect. With over one hundred and fifty people continuously attending, an open organization was established to develop dialogue among the neighbors so that a commission seeking to integrate them all into the assembly would begin to function.

Therefore in contrast with the Villa Crespo Assembly where the activity of a dining room and snack service became the focus for strong confrontation and initial internal breakdown, an atmosphere of relative harmony and convergence of interest developed in Palermo. But the principal difficulty in the discussion about the food kitchen was how to think about such activity from a logic that would transcend mere charity. "How are we different from *Cáritas* [the Catholic charity]?" posed a disturbing question in a debate over political goals to be pursued.

In conclusion, the move to develop ties with vulnerable groups tended to activate a certain middle class notion of playing the role of intermediary or person joining groups together, although it also brought to the center of the debate a discussion about charitable versus solidarity-building characteristics of action. In reality, an inward focus played as important a role as outward efforts in the resolution of the tensions and original ambivalence that passed through the movement. In this sense, the sense of division and internal lack of cooperation of the individuals mobilized tended to reinforce an inclination toward isolation and self-focus that had been objected to equally in the repudiated "political class." At the end, this logic for action strengthened the disruptive character of

the movement so that the kind of initial aspiration of universalistic character promoting the creation of a new kind of institutionality with the development of other forms of democracy could never conclusively be consolidated.

By the beginning of 2003, the basic space open to the piquetero movements and the progressive middle class after the June assassinations began to contract in a dizzying manner. Despite the discrediting of the traditional parties, a demand for "institutional normality" could be heard from those who a few months before had been part of the mobilizations demanding "let's throw them all out." This was at the time when a kind of saturation in respect to the street blockages and demonstrations began once again to reduce the degree of tolerance for social protest. In February 2003, a few months before the presidential elections, the government began a strong campaign against activist social groups that had as its purpose the clearance of the buildings taken over by the neighborhood assemblies and of the factories like Brukman Textiles occupied by their workers, and the jailing of known piquetero leaders in the interior of the country. As was pointed to and denounced by many social organizations, these repressive acts were aimed as much to establish the idea that the elections would bring to an end a socio-political cycle as well as to seek to erase the visible signs of self-organization and self-management from society.

The elections took place in an unusual climate of indifference. The fragmentation of the vote was such that, after a year and a half of mobilizations, the surveys carried out some weeks before saw the two right-wing neoliberal candidates, Carlos Menem and Ricardo López Murphy, as the favorites in a runoff. Ultimately, faced with this depiction of the situation (suitably manipulated by the mass media), strategic voting by a progressive middle class tied to the always volatile political center-left took place, securing the second place position in the first round for current president Néstor Kirchner, right behind a Menem who would soon withdraw.

The election results indicated a low percentage of absenteeism and of blank ballots. In addition, they suggested that even the supporters of those piquetero groups that had called for a blank or "ideological" vote had supported the two less conservative Peronist Party candidates including the current president. Last, the leftist parties like the Trotskyites that ran candidates attained the worst results in their history. In Sum, the

presidential elections raised a major question about the efficacy of the intense mobilizations of 2002 in their questioning of political representation.

Rather than the persistence of Peronism in working class parts of the population, the provincial elections taking place in 2003 seemed to corroborate the consolidation of a political scene presided over from now into the future by a kind of “ever-lasting Peronism” newly established due to the collapse of the other traditional parties. In any case, the facts once again emphasized the historical effectiveness of the political turns and ideological shifts of Peronism. Thus via Kirchner, the political agenda seemed to introduce new themes and expectations some of which had formed part of the demands of the numerous actors mobilized in 2002 (the purging of the Supreme Court and the cleansing of state institutions, among others) that had encountered an unfavorable reception in the previous administration.

Finally, going beyond the fact that the political reconstruction has been limited, it seems worthwhile asking what has remained at the end of such social excitement with all its high and low points from that undoubtedly extraordinary year 2002?

By Way of a Conclusion: Hypotheses about a Still Uncertain Ending

“Autonomy is not a circle but an opening, an ontological opening and the possibility of passing beyond the circle of information, of knowledge, and of organization that characterizes self-made beings as submissive individuals. . . .Autonomy signifies the alteration of the system of knowledge and organization now existing; it signifies the constitution of a world with its own different laws.”

Cornelius Castoriadis, *Los dominios del Hombre*.

Once we have noted the difficulties and limits that doubtlessly marked the assembly movement (and mobilizations in general), once we have accepted the change in

political conditions, nothing would be easier—but nothing more forced—than arriving at negative or fatalistic conclusions about what really took place in 2002. In reality, going beyond the high expectations that the cycle of mobilization begun in December 2001 aroused in certain social sectors and in numerous foreign observers, we believe that the accumulated outcome is without doubt positive, and this despite all the difficulties indicated.

Certainly, the neighborhood assemblies never came close to sharing any single pattern of experience in common. Riddled by dissension and a series of ambivalent demands, the assemblies tended to expend a good part of their political energy in really destructive behavior. In many cases, the efforts to defend different views led merely to fragmentation and the multiplication of various shifting alliances, to the detriment of any genuine political expression. The result that many hoped for, that is, the rise of a new political process, in the end never took place. Consequently, the possibility of creating a new institutional form seemed weakened.

But the answers each assembly provided for these problems doubtlessly cannot all fit within a single model. What is certain is that in an important number of cases, the action taken and apparent resolution of these basic tensions contributed to indicate the very limits of the movement. Thus, by December 2002, the emergence of these dilemmas revealed a scenario very different from that of the first months. For example, after fierce struggle, the Villa Crespo Assembly was dominated by a group of left-wing party militants who, due to their isolation, were evicted at the end of 2003 from the building the assembly had occupied. In its case, the Palermo Assembly ended up dissolving itself, after encountering insuperable difficulties not just in its internal ideological disputes, but also given the impossibility of responding with any real political efficacy to member demands for creating a new institutional structure. At the end only a few assemblies managed to maintain their autonomy, adopting a course of action similar to that of some parts of the MTD (Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados/Movement of Unemployed Workers) piqueteros, or shifting toward a new type of more socio-cultural movement (like the assemblies of Cid Campeador, Palermo Viejo, Colegiales, San Telmo, Florida Este, and Almagro, among others).

Despite such a result, plus the loss of members, the retreats, and the difficulties that really were the consequence of the assembly movement, no one ought to

underestimate the accomplishments of this new experience showing the emergence of new political commitment toward social interaction. In reality, what the assemblies ended up confirming was the birth of a new ethos of militancy constructed on certain articulated principles like, among others, autonomy in respect to parties, unions, or the State; followed next by a strong counter-cultural vocation; and, finally, the move to create organizational structures that were flexible, anti-bureaucratic, and of local character.

But without doubt, the most important feature that emerged from the uneven assembly experience was the goal of autonomy. In the heat of discussions and practices that paradoxically reflected the same process of fragmentation and weakening of the assembly movement, the demand for autonomy was becoming clearer, becoming more detailed, eventually acquiring a clear mass, becoming in the end a type of variable indicating political configuration. Moreover, we would be able to claim that as an identifying variable, the demand for autonomy is found among a multiplicity of organizations of a social, political, and cultural nature that emerged here and elsewhere on the planet in the 1990s, organizations characterized by a style of construction that strongly contrasts with those found in the parties of the traditional left.¹¹ In sum, from a political point of view, the assemblies showed greater impact of certain concepts of the left whose key elements are found both in the affirmation of autonomy as in the development of flexible horizontal networks resistant to any case of decision-making from above.¹²

In this sense, it is necessary to remember that in our country autonomous organizations began to be created in the second half of the 1990s, in the light of the effects produced by the neo-liberal model, as is the case of certain piquetero groups coming from the south of the Greater Buenos Aires area and of the first collectives of political art like the Street Art Group (Grupo de Arte Callejero or GAC) and Etcétera that participated in the *escrache* protests of shouted insults aimed at corrupt officials carried out by the Hijos group. Something similar could be said about groups concerning militant cinema—like Insurgent Movies and the Alavio group—or of the Action Network, an alternative news agency created in Avellaneda that is today's ANRED. However, it was not until December 2001 when the country entered a period marked by intense social mobilization oriented toward direct action and self-organization “from below” that these groups grew more powerful, becoming visible in an increasing number of situations:

collectives on art, photography, and anti-establishment information, and new piquetero groups of a more local character, among others. In other terms, the assembly process—and the mobilizations taking place in 2002 in general—produced the empowerment and the flowering of countercultural forces. The appropriate model for their social interaction and involvement was the neighborhood assemblies, but also some particular situations like the case of Brukman Textiles which was the center of intense activism.

In conclusion, these countercultural collectives constituted one of the less known dimensions of the social movements present in Argentina today, ones that not only provide an account of what actually took place once the initial period of enthusiasm passed, but ones which alert us to the emergence of a political mind-set with its own special character; this is not really comparable to the experiences of mobilization and struggle that, even with their great heterogeneity, marked most of what was happening among the piquetero groups.

Notes.

1. An earlier version of this work was presented at the CEDES seminar, “Movimientos Sociales en la Argentina de Hoy,” on December 5, 2002. It was written in collaboration with a research team consisting of Damian Corral, Mariana Barattini, and Marina García.

2. The assembly adopted the name of one of the young people killed in the days of December 19 and 20, 2001.

3. The question whether more autonomous commissions—with a greater role for “independent” activists—should participate or not and should respect the ideological perspective of the assemblies fits into this conflict over the proper shape and identity of that space.

4. The occupation of the Banco Provincia building had an effect on the neighborhood and on residents estranged from the assembly: in the first meeting after the takeover, some eighty people came together, over double the number of those participating in the assembly when

it was held in the street.

5. An indicator of the charity-like character with which the quest for local neighborhood self-management was conceived was the philanthropic activity carried out by members of this commission in coordination with the assembly in Las Cañitas (an upper-middle class neighborhood in the Capital): once a month they sought to collect disused clothes and shoes to give to needy children in both neighborhoods. Similarly, on Children's Day, they collected toys and food.

6. In turn, both the image of "bridge" and that of "door" rested on important precedents in the piquetero movement, within an excessively varied range that to the present day includes center-left perspectives with clear elements of a social movement to completely anti-capitalist postures coming from autonomous groups and parties of the left. See Svampa and Pereyra (2003), chapter 4.

7. The fact that some names of assembly members are on record as responsible for the takeover and that these names were never replaced by others was a matter of controversy among assembly members. Those so listed are presently under indictment in the courts. The occupied site was cleared out by the police in November 2003.

8. Note that both the symbolic process and the disagreement in respect to social experience are not the same in the two cases. In its extreme form then, the combination of the old practices of party militants with expert knowledge reflects a "dependent reversion" in which someone claims to have given up a specific symbolic model but where his practices continued being influenced by that model. Despite criticism of the forms on which the "old left" was built, and in spite of the illusion that the person has of abandoning that model, the question is in effect whether action continues to take place in this case under its imprint. The subject remains a prisoner of a model that he questions and of which, nevertheless, he is unable to completely divert himself. On the other hand, the situation of the party militant is different: his removal from the social

experience with the replacement of that reality through a symbolic mechanism. On this theme, see Martuccelli and Svampa (1997).

9. On this theme, see the interesting work by García (2002) analyzing the relations of cartoneros and assembly members.

10. The peronist political reformulation has clear internal and external limits. On the one hand, despite its positive social image, Kirchner's leadership hardly reorganizes within its ranks all the different internal peronist factions; on the other hand, the different provincial elections of 2003 provide an account of a new growth of electoral abstention that in some cases exceeded thirty percent of those registered (*Página 12*, December 4, 2003).

11. In reality, the emergence of new forms of organization inclined toward autonomy is one of the most salient elements of contemporary social movements. In this sense, Argentina has not escaped from this world-wide tendency.

12. Although it is not possible to deal here with this theme, the question is not unimportant. By the facts of its nature, this perspective works against the possibility for true political expression considering the formation of a political being. For a different conceptualization in respect to political expression as a constituent element for a different identity, see Laclau (2000).

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